

Maine Delegation Urges Navy Secretary to Sustain Brunswick's Commissary & Exchange Services

Friday, June 26 2009

WASHINGTON DC – U.S. Senators Olympia J. Snowe and Susan Collins (R-Maine) along with U.S. Reps. Mike Michaud and Chellie Pingree (D-Maine) today, in a letter, urged Navy Secretary Ray Mabus to sustain commissary and exchange services for the thousands of veteran beneficiaries who will continue to reside in the mid-coast region of Maine following the closure of Brunswick Naval Air Station (BNAS) in 2011.

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"We share your belief that providing for the men and women who have volunteered in the service of our nation must be a priority. Ensuring that these services continue in Maine is quite simply the right thing to do," wrote the lawmakers.

"We remain eager to work with you on sustaining these well-earned benefits for our service members and veterans and their families in mid-coast Maine. We also look forward to working with you during your service as Navy Secretary to ensure that the Navy-Marine Corps teams remains the Nation's frontline, forward deployed defense force," concluded the delegation.

*Copy of the Letter Follows:

June 26, 2009

The Honorable Ray Mabus

Secretary of the Navy

Office of the Secretary of the Navy

2000 Navy Pentagon

Washington, D.C. 20350-2000

Dear Secretary Mabus:

First, let us again thank you for your recent visit to Maine on June 15, 2009. We can envision no better start to your tenure as the Nation's 75th Secretary of the Navy than by visiting both of Maine's two great shipyards: Bath Iron Works (BIW) in Bath and the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard at Kittery. We are confident that during your stewardship of the world's greatest Navy, you will recall your positive experiences from your visit to the yards that day, and know without a doubt that the hardworking craftsman of the Navy team at Kittery and Bath are delivering the most technologically advanced warships in history.

Among the many issues we discussed during your visit, we want to affirm our strong conviction for sustaining commissary and exchange services for the thousands of beneficiaries who will continue to reside in the mid-coast region of Maine following the closure of Brunswick Naval Air Station (BNAS) in 2011, and again commend your decision to review this matter as one of your first official actions in office. We share your belief that providing for the men and women who have volunteered in the service of our nation must be a priority. Ensuring that these services continue in Maine is quite simply the right thing to do.

With six military commands remaining in the area after the closure of BNAS, including the U.S. Navy Supervisor of Shipbuilding and the many sailors who are assigned to ships under production at BIW, the Lewiston Army Reserve Center, the Auburn Army Reserve Center, the National Guard Armory at Lewiston, the National Guard Armory at Gardiner, and the future Joint Forces Reserve Center at Brunswick, there will be approximately 12,000 active duty, reserve, national guardsmen, military retirees and their dependents living within a 20-mile radius of the Brunswick-Bath-Topsham community, each of whom has earned these benefits. An equally important part of this community is our veterans who sustained injuries in the course of their service to our country that has rendered them 100 percent disabled. There are currently more than 300 veterans in this group who also have rightfully earned these benefits.

Discontinuing the availability of these benefits to this community of patriots in mid-coast Maine would require them to travel either nearly two hours to Bangor or an hour-and-a-half to Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. As the former governor of Mississippi and a former Naval surface warfare officer, you can appreciate the difficulty that this would impose, for example, on sailors assigned to ships being built at BIW, who, in Navy tradition, are competitively selected for these assignments and proudly referred to as "plankowners." These plankowners and their families depend on Brunswick's commissary and exchange in the same way that plankowners aboard ships being built at Pascagoula use commissaries and exchanges at the Air Force base in Keesler, Mississippi, and the Navy base in Biloxi, Mississippi. Closing the commissary and exchange in Brunswick and requiring sailors and their families to drive 110 miles to Bangor or 82 miles to Portsmouth would be like closing the Keesler and Biloxi commissaries and exchanges and forcing Navy families, as well as the other beneficiaries, in Mississippi to drive 94 miles to the stores in New Orleans, Louisiana, or 75 miles to the stores in Pensacola, Florida. There is no question that this would place an enormous hardship on these families.

Again, thank you for your visit to Maine's shipyards and thank you for your review of the commissary and exchange services. We remain eager to work with you on sustaining these well-earned benefits for our service members and veterans and their families in mid-coast Maine. We also look forward to working with you during your service as Navy Secretary to ensure that the Navy-Marine Corps team remains the Nation's frontline, forward deployed defense force.

Sincerely,

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